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Prosecutors kept mute, felt Nixon might destroy case against Agnew

WASHINGTON (AP) — The prosecutors who developed corruption charges against Vice President Spiro T. Agnew resisted telling President Richard M. Nixon the details for fear he might destroy their case by making it public.

The prosecutors also were worried that Nixon, then enmeshed in the developing Watergate scandal, might "in pursuit of his own objectives," divulge the details to Agnew.

According to documents made public Friday, the prosecutors believed that Nixon wanted Agnew to resign and would put pressure on him to step down by demonstrating that the government had a strong case.

The prosecution did not specifically state what they believed Nixon's motives would be for wanting Agnew out of office.

Agnew resigned on Oct. 10, 1973, pleading no contest to one count of tax evasion stemming from his alleged acceptance of at least $87,500 in kickbacks while he was governor of Maryland.

He was placed on three years unsupervised probation and fined $10,000. Currently a business consultant, Agnew was out of the country Friday and not available for comment, according to a spokesman.

The newly released documents show that top Justice Department officials wanted to charge him with bribery, conspiracy or extortion. In the end, they settled for Agnew's no-contest plea coupled with his resignation.

About 2,500 pages of Agnew case documents, many heavily censored, were made public in response to a Freedom of Information suit filed in 1975 by two George Washington University law students.

However, the government withheld any documents describing what took place at the final plea-bargaining session between Agnew's lawyers, the judge in the case, Walter Hoffman, and Justice Department officials. A Justice Department spokesman said the record of that meeting was not disclosed at Agnew's request.

Attorney General Elliot Richardson met with Agnew on Aug. 6, 1973, "at the request of the president in order to give him a summary" of the case, according to a Richardson memo.

Two days later, Assistant U.S. Attorney Russell T. Baker Jr. of Baltimore wrote that the meeting had been "designed to force a confrontation which would result in the vice president's resignation.

"When the meeting did not produce the desired result, the White House suggested that more detailed disclosures be made to the vice president in the hopes he would become convinced that the case against him was so strong that he should resign."

In a memo dated, Aug. 13, 1973, Baker detailed the prosecutors' fears of premature disclosure of the details of their case.